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THE COAL MINERS' STRIKE OF 1897.

THE great coal miners' strike of 1897 in the bituminous districts of the United States began on July 4, and extended through all or the greater parts of the States of Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. The mines of these States yield over 70 per cent. of the country's total product of bituminous coal, and employ nearly 70 per cent. of the total number of employees engaged in bituminous mines.*

The causes which led up to the strike were various; but at bottom it was due to one,—the constant reduction in wages through several years, which had brought the miners and their families to the verge of starvation. The object of the strike, aside from protests against local grievances, was to advance wages so that “at least the necessities of life might be procured.”†

At the annual convention of the United Mine Workers, held in Columbus, Ohio, January 12–16, 1897, after a careful discussion of the deplorable conditions prevailing in the various mining districts, it was agreed that the scale of prices paid for mining should be advanced to the following rates: ‡—

Pennsylvania, Pittsburg district	69 cents per ton
Ohio	60 “ “ “
Indiana (bituminous mines)	60 “ “ “
Southern Illinois	55 “ “ “
Northern Illinois, the same as in 1894, average about .	80½ “ “ “

These were to be the prices for pick (hand) mining. Machine mining was to be paid three-fifths the price paid per ton for pick mining in the respective districts, except in Indiana, where the price was to be four-fifths. The time of

* See *Mineral Resources of the United States: Coal* (1896), pp. 19, 31; Part V. of the *Eighteenth Annual Report of the United States Geological Survey*.

† See *United Mine Workers' Journal*, July 8, 1897. This is the official organ of the United Mine Workers of America.

‡ *Mine Workers' Journal*, July 1, 1897.

the inauguration of a strike to enforce these demands was left to the discretion of the National Executive Board and district presidents of the United Mine Workers, who were instructed at the national convention to meet later in Columbus, Ohio, and decide when, in their judgment, the time had become opportune. Accordingly, these representatives of the miners met in Columbus, June 24-26, and set July 4 as the day on which work should be suspended. It was maintained that the time for the struggle was opportune, because business was reviving, and there was an apparent upward tendency in the prices of all commodities; the miner could and should secure a share of the gains from improving conditions.*

To understand what the advanced scale of prices demanded by the miners meant, it is necessary to know what the prices paid for mining were before the strike, and what the annual earnings and the condition of the miners really were. In the great mining district of Western Pennsylvania, commonly known as the Pittsburg district, which produces 50,000,000 tons of bituminous coal annually and employs over 70,000 men and boys,† the price paid for mining in 1893 was, for thin vein, 79 cents per ton; and, for thick vein, 65 cents per ton. In 1897 the price paid was, for thin vein, 47 to 54 cents per ton; for thick vein, 28 to 30 cents per ton.‡ The reduction in four years was over 40 per cent.

The condition of the miners and their families in this district was wretched. A large majority of the men employed are foreigners, who can neither speak nor understand the English language, and whose standard of living is far below that of the English or American workman. In his testimony before a special committee,§ appointed by the legislature of Pennsyl-

* *Mine Workers' Journal*, July 1, 1897.

† *Mineral Resources* (1896), pp. 17, 19.

‡ Mr. M. D. Ratchford, president of the United Mine Workers of America, in the *Mine Workers' Journal*, July 22, 1897, p. 1. See also an address by Mr. John McBride, printed in the *Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Convention of the United Mine Workers of America*, held at Columbus, Ohio, February 12-18, 1895, pp. 3-6.

§ This committee consisted of five members, three from the House of Representatives, appointed by the Speaker; and two from the Senate, appointed by the President *pro tempore*. See *Legislative Record of Pennsylvania*, No. 306, p. 2385, June 7, 1897.

vania early in the present year, to investigate the condition of the miners of the Pittsburg district, President Ratchford said that in three places in that district — Eureka, Smithton, and Banning — 80 per cent. of the miners had no knowledge of our language. They live, he says, “like sheep in the shambles.”* And the committee in its report to the legislature says: “60 per centum and more of the miners in the district have been drawn from the lowest ranks of the laboring classes of the Old World; and they came here without any knowledge whatever of our government, its institutions, or its people. . . . Your committee found the homes or abodes of the miners at many of the mines in a very filthy and untenable condition, the miners being herded together like cattle and in many places wallowing in their own filth, breeding disease, and affecting not only their own health, but that of the community in which they live. . . . The small percentage of American and English-speaking laborers who find employment in the mines, as a general rule, are an intelligent, industrious, and frugal class.” According to figures given by the committee, the average gross earnings of the miners in this district at the time of the investigation (April and May) were not over \$3.50 to \$4 per man per week. These conditions were made worse by the fact that the miners were compelled to deal in “company stores,” where excessive prices were charged, and to live in company houses at excessive rents. The testimony given before the committee showed that houses costing \$50 were let to the miners at \$2 or \$2.50 per month, houses costing from \$200 to \$400 were let at from \$5 to \$7 per month. Thus it became extremely difficult for the miner to make a living, and the constant tendency was to keep him in debt. “The condition of the miner generally,” says the committee, “is bad, is one of chronic debt, complaint, and poverty, and one that enables his employer, in most cases, to keep him in such condition.”†

What was true of Pennsylvania was true, as to wages, of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois; and it was largely true in respect to the character of the population, especially in Illinois. In Ohio and Indiana in the last four years preceding the strike

* *Mine Workers' Journal*, March 6, 1897. † *Legislative Record*, pp. 2385, 2386.

the price per ton for mining fell from 70 and 75 cents respectively to 51 cents in both States, with a still further reduction contemplated in Ohio to 45 cents per ton.* In the great Hocking Valley district in Ohio, which produces over one-third of the coal produced in the State, during a period of eight months, from October 1, 1896, to June 1, 1897, the total average gross earnings in one of the largest mines were \$60 per man, or \$7.50 per man per month. From these earnings must be deducted the cost of mine supplies, such as tool-sharpening and power; and only the remainder is left to the miner for house rent, coal, and food, not to mention any comforts. At another mine in the same district, according to President Ratchford, as shown by the written statement of the coal company (for which, however, no dates are given), the aggregate gross earnings of thirty-nine men for two weeks' labor were \$223.98, or an average of \$2.87 per man per week.† These figures, no doubt, do not represent the general range of earnings for the State, which would be somewhat higher; yet they serve to show the extremes reached in some of the worst places. According to Mr. R. M. Haseltine, chief inspector of mines in Ohio, the average gross earnings per man for 1895 were \$221.95, or \$18.48 per month per man.‡ The average gross earnings per man for 1896 were \$221.55, or \$18.46 per man per month.§ But the figures for 1896, it should be said, represent the average for 1,425 less men than were engaged in pick mining in 1895, there being a proportionate increase in the number of machine miners. These averages tell their own story. Further reductions were made in the price of mining in 1897 from that which had been obtained in 1896, and the miners and their families must have been reduced to a condition of great destitution.

Practically the same conditions prevailed in Illinois. In that State the production of coal increased, in the three years following 1894, from 17,113,090 tons to 19,786,000 tons. The increase in 1896 over 1895 was over 2,000,000 tons. But

* President Ratchford in *Mine Workers' Journal*, July 22, 1897.

† *Ibid.*

‡ *Twenty-first Annual Report* (1895), p. 25. These figures are for pick mining. The annual earnings for machine mining are somewhat higher.

§ *Twenty-second Annual Report* (1896).

this increase in tonnage was accompanied by a corresponding decrease in the selling price of coal; and, moreover, the year 1895 presented the anomaly that the wages of the miners fell even more rapidly than the market price of coal. The Illinois Bureau of Labor Statistics, after noting the increase of tonnage and the fall in prices in that year, makes the following comment: "Upon whom this loss fell is shown by the fact that, while the operatives received an average of 7.76 cents less per ton for the coal, the miners were paid an average of 9.81 cents less per ton for mining it."* Mr. Ryan, State secretary-treasurer of the United Mine Workers, estimated the actual earnings of each miner per month at about \$12.† For Northern Illinois, and for the period immediately preceding the strike, this figure states the simple truth. During the past summer I made a personal investigation, from the books, of the earnings of miners in the employment of one of the oldest coal companies in the northern part of the State. I found that for five months before the strike the average gross earnings of 229 miners were \$12.95 per man per month. The average earnings for the State as a whole would probably be somewhat greater. In 1896 the average gross earnings for the year were \$318.65 per man, or about \$26.50 per man per month.‡ But during the six months of 1897 immediately preceding the strike there were great reductions in the price paid for mining throughout the State, while the average number of days worked per week was considerably less than in 1896. These two changes, taken together, would greatly reduce the

* *Fifteenth Annual Report: Coal*, p. 21.

† In an open letter to United States Senator Mason of Illinois, Mr. Ryan said (I quote from the original manuscript letter): "We have been forced to accept reduction after reduction in the price of mining, until the price now paid is so low that miners cannot earn more than an average of 75 cents per day, while the mines do not run more than half-time. But let us suppose the average wage to be \$1 per day. At three days per week, the miner's wages would amount to about \$12 per month, which is certainly not less than a fair average. For a family of five, which is a fair average number of a miner's family, we find that the good housewife must for \$12 provide 450 meals in a month, or, in other words, she has the magnificent sum of 2.66 cents to spend on each meal for each member of her family. This is not taking into account the fact that people in mining communities wear clothes, pay house rent and doctors' bills, not to mention many other items of expense."

‡ *Fifteenth Annual Report Bureau of Labor Statistics: Coal in Illinois* (1896), p. 21.

general average of wages earned in the months of 1897 before the strike, though probably not to a point quite so low as is indicated by the figures just given for Northern Illinois.

The nationality and standard of living of a large portion of the miners of Illinois are much the same as in Pennsylvania, though the non-English speaking element is not quite so large as in the latter State. Out of 266 names of miners taken at random from the pay-roll of the company already referred to, I found 123 to be English, while 143 were non-English, chiefly Bohemians, Poles, and Italians. What is true of Northern Illinois is fast becoming true, I was told by the officials of the miners, throughout the other mining districts of the State. More and more the English-speaking miner must face the alternative of leaving the field or suffering himself to be dragged down to a much lower standard of living than that to which he has been accustomed.*

Enough has been said to show what were the conditions of the miners in these districts previous to the strike. No one at all familiar with those conditions will deny that the miners' earnings had been reduced below the living point. Everywhere poverty and degradation were manifest. When the last extreme was reached, and men were unable to provide themselves and their families with the barest necessities, they made common cause, and resolved that, if starve they must, they would starve in attempting to improve their condition. President Ratchford, of the United Mine Workers, in a statement to the public concerning the causes which brought on the strike, thus put their case: "This movement is nothing less than a spontaneous uprising of an enslaved people, who have determined to submit no longer to the cruel, heartless, and inhuman conditions imposed upon them by unscrupulous employers, and which have reduced the miners and those depending on them to actual starvation." But he adds: "It should be said, in justice to a large majority of employers, that they are not responsible for these conditions. They are due to the actions of a few who have cut prices far below the demands of

* For an excellent brief account of the changes that have taken place in the character of the mining population of the United States see pp. 459-463 of an article by Mr. J. E. Williams in *Carter's Monthly* (Chicago) for November, 1897. See also the *New York Evening Post* for July 20, 1897, p. 7.

the market, thus demoralizing the trade and cutting wages indiscriminately, until the point is reached where men can no longer live by their thrift and industry." * To what extent the conditions described are due to the causes referred to in this last statement we shall now consider.

For several years past the market price of bituminous coal has been declining, and since 1893 the decline has been very rapid. This has been due largely, no doubt, to the great business depression which set in at that time, and from which we have not yet recovered; but it is probably due also to the fact that since 1894 there has been a considerable and continued increase in the amount of bituminous coal put upon the market. In 1896 there was a total increase in the United States of 2,522,000 tons over the amount produced in 1895. At the same time there was a decrease of \$888,256 in the value of the total product, the average price per ton having fallen from 86 to 83 cents. In the States involved in the recent strike the fluctuations in the average prices per ton paid for coal at the mine during six years have been as follows: † —

	1891.	1892.	1893.	1894.	1895.	1896.	<i>Per Cent. of Decrease from 1891 to 1896.</i>
Illinois . .	\$0.91	\$0.91	\$0.89	\$0.89	\$0.80	\$0.80	11 +
Indiana . .	1.03	1.08	1.07	.96	.91	.84	18 +
Ohio94	.94	.92	.83	.79	.79	16 —
Pennsylvania	.87	.84	.80	.74	.72	.71	18 +
West Virginia	.80	.80	.77	.75	.68	.65	28 —

For the recent strike the figures of production and price are highly significant. They show a steady decline in the selling price of bituminous coal. A fall even greater occurred in some of the newer coal fields, such as those of Alabama and Georgia. Thus in Alabama the price declined 37 per cent. from 1886 to 1896; while in Georgia, in half that time, 1891-96, there was the extraordinary decline of 53 per cent.‡ Of the five States involved in the strike, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and

* *United Mine Workers' Journal*, July 22, 1897, p. 1.

† *Mineral Resources: Coal* (1896), p. 28.

These prices include the profits of the mine operator, but do not include charges for transportation.

‡ *Ibid.*, pp. 32, 33.

Indiana show a decrease in production in 1896, while West Virginia and Illinois show a great increase. In Pennsylvania the decrease was a little less than 700,000 tons. In Ohio it was 480,000 tons. On the other hand, the increase in West Virginia for the same year was about 1,500,000 tons, while that of Illinois was about 2,000,000 tons.* These figures are important in considering the strike of the past summer. The coal fields of West Virginia have been greatly developed in the last few years. In 1886 West Virginia produced only half as much coal as Ohio. In 1893 her product was more than 66 per cent. of that in Ohio; and in 1896 it was greater.† The product of West Virginia during these years has been coming into closer and closer competition both with Pennsylvania and Ohio coals. The grade of labor in the mines of West Virginia is the cheapest, a large proportion of the miners being negroes, who are content with the most meagre wages. It is said that in many parts of West Virginia a white miner takes a number of places in a mine under contract to bring out the coal at a certain stipulated price per ton, and then hires negroes to mine the coal at a mere pittance per day.‡ Whether or no as a result of this practice, which has in it all the evils of the "sweating system," the average cost of coal per ton in that State has been less than in any of the other four States engaged in the strike. In 1894 an organization was formed by the operators along the New and Kanawha Rivers, in Fayette and Kanawha Counties, under the name of the Kanawha and New River Coal and Coke Company, for the purpose of extending the market for the coals of this region, particularly in the West.§ In this they have undoubtedly been successful. It may also be noted here that in West Virginia the strike leaders had the greatest difficulty in enlisting the miners in their ranks.

In Illinois the great increase in production has been in the central and southern parts of the State. There the veins are thicker, and in many places mining machines have been introduced with great success. In St. Clair County machines

* *Mineral Resources: Coal* (1896), p. 28.

† *Ibid.*, pp. 22, 25, 27, 28.

‡ See article by R. Askew, secretary of the Northern Mineral Mine Workers, in *Mine Workers' Journal*, September 23, 1897.

§ *Mineral Resources* (1894), p. 203.

are used almost exclusively, with the result that in some of the mines coal was extracted in 1896 at as low a cost as 25 cents per ton, or even lower.* In former years these mines found their market principally in the South and West. But for some years past their product has been coming into the Chicago market in direct competition with the product of mines from the northern part of the State. It is no uncommon thing to see whole train-loads of this coal passing directly through the Northern coal fields to the Chicago market. Add this competition from Southern Illinois and West Virginia to the competition already existing for some years in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana, and we have the inevitable result of cut-throat competition everywhere.

For years, coal mines in none of these States have been running steadily. Further, nearly everywhere there are more miners than there are places for them; and the competition for work has become keen among the workmen themselves. The Pennsylvania Legislative Committee, in its report on the Pittsburgh district, says: "The undisputed testimony reveals the fact that 50 per cent. of the mines in the district, running to their full capacity, will at any time supply the demand of the market in which they find sale for their product. . . . It is also a patent fact that there are at least two miners engaged in the mining districts for every one man's work." A prominent operator in Northern Illinois makes a statement even stronger. He says: "There are twice or three times as many mines open in the several coal-producing States as are required to fill the natural demand for coal. There are employed in these mines about double the number of men that are required to produce the coal consumed." † These statements in regard to the excess of mines and miners may seem exaggerated. Yet, in the main, they are true; and it is undisputed that for some years before the business depression set in, as well as afterwards, mines have not been running more than half to three-quarter time.‡

* Letter to the present writer from State Inspector Thomas Cumming, dated December 6, 1896.

† From a letter to the present writer, dated November 29, 1897.

‡ The *Black Diamond*, the official organ of dealers in bituminous coal in the Middle West, under date of March 27, 1897, says: "Evidence is accumulating

But, aside from the honest though frantic competition resulting from the conditions just described, a number of operators resorted to dishonest methods, by which they were enabled to sell coal at lower rates than their honest competitors. Many such, especially in Pennsylvania, kept "company stores" in connection with their mines, at which the miners were forced to buy at exorbitant prices. Not infrequently a greater number were employed, generally men with families, than were really needed to run the mines, in order to increase the sales of the company stores. This practice alone gave the dishonest operator an advantage of from 5 to 15 cents a ton, and, it is maintained, even as much as 20 cents, over the honest operator, who paid his men cash and allowed them to buy where they pleased.* Some used false weights, some too large screens. In most of the mines in the Pittsburg district the screen over which the coal must pass before it is weighed is known as an inch and a half screen. It is usually five feet in width by twelve feet in length, and is composed of flat iron

each week that there must be either a decrease in the number of mines operated in the West, or miners must accept lower wages. The operators who have their capital invested in productive property are not likely to go out of business, and allow their mines to remain idle. On the other hand, miners have the choice of adopting some other calling to make a living or accepting less pay for their work. The introduction of mining machinery and the greatly increased number of mines, together with the fierce competition, are responsible for the present situation in the West. Production of coal is far in advance of the natural consumptive growth, and primarily is the cause of the conditions which now exist in the soft coal trade." See also *Mineral Resources: Coal* (1894), p. 23.

* See *Legislative Record*, No. 306, June 7, 1897, p. 2386. The Pennsylvania Legislative Committee, already referred to, maintains that the advantage gained from this dishonest use of the company store amounted to "at least 20 cents per ton." But this is probably an extreme statement. In the year 1893-94, when the abolition of the company store system was discussed in Pennsylvania, it was agreed by miners and operators that there should be a differential of 5 cents less in the price paid per ton for mining where the company store should be abolished or where it did not exist. When it was found that this did not check the evil, the differential was increased to 20 cents per ton, with the result that for a while company stores disappeared. Later those operators in whose favor the differential had been made advanced the price paid for mining to the regular rates which had previously obtained in the Pittsburg district, with the exception of the New York and Cleveland Gas Coal Company. This company refused to raise the price to that paid by other companies, the difference being from 5 to 10 cents, and later as much as 16 cents per ton. 16 cents per ton would probably represent the greatest advantage obtained from the abuse of the company store system, and the average was probably considerably less. See President Ratchford's testimony before the Pennsylvania Legislative Committee, in *Mine Workers' Journal*, May 6, 1897. See the *Journal* also for September 10, 1897.

bars an inch and a half in width, with a space of an inch and a half between them. Even with a screen of this kind, much coal passes through for which the miner receives nothing, but which the operator sells. But, when screens contain more than sixty superficial square feet, with diamond instead of flat bars and with spaces averaging two inches and a half instead of an inch and a half, a much larger amount of coal must pass through. A number of such screens were found at mines in the Pittsburgh district.* Whether the evils described prevailed to as great an extent elsewhere as in the Pittsburgh district matters but little. To-day the coal market is practically one for all the States under consideration; and this, especially under the present conditions of the coal trade, makes it possible for the most unscrupulous operator to drag others to his own level or force them out of business.

From all these causes—increasing production in face of slack demand, and dishonest competition by unscrupulous operators—there was general complaint of lack of profit for the capital engaged in mining. Mr. W. P. De Armitt, of the New York and Cleveland Gas Coal Company, whose mines are in the Pittsburgh district, testified before the Pennsylvania Legislative Committee that his company in 1896, on an investment of \$1,000,000, made only \$8,000 profit, or less than 1 per cent.; this, too, when the company had been mining coal at several cents less per ton than competitive companies in the same district. “The companies, in their anxiety to place their tonnage,” writes a prominent operator in Northern Illinois, “have forced the market, making big reductions in price with little or no profit. It is safe to say that the companies are few and far between who have succeeded in paying a dividend to their stockholders the past two or three years.”† Under such conditions, many operators, as well as the miners themselves, welcomed the strike as the only means of relief.

For some eight years, from 1886 to the general coal strike of 1894, there had been a system of interstate agreement, in

* *Legislative Record*, as above (p. 195). See also *Mine Workers' Journal*, April 29, 1897.

† From a letter to the present writer, dated November 29, 1897. On the day before the strike began (July 3, 1897) the *Black Diamond* said: “Many oper-

which both miners and operators had taken part. Representatives of both, from Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, met in convention annually, and adopted jointly a scale of prices for the ensuing year. By maintaining a differential in prices paid for mining in the various competitive fields, it was thought that approximately uniform rates of wages and profits would result. This, by giving all an equal chance in the general market, would prevent one operator from taking undue advantage of his competitors.* The system was first urged by the miners in 1885. On September 12 of that year the executive board of the National Federation of Miners and Mine Laborers, in session at Indianapolis, issued an address to mine operators of the United States to meet them "for the purpose of adjusting the market and mining prices in such a way as to avoid strikes and lockouts, and to give to each party an increased profit from the sale of coal."† The result was a convention in Chicago, October 15, 1885, at which both operators and miners were represented. A joint committee of miners and operators was appointed "to invite the co-operation of all engaged in coal mining in America, and to call a meeting of operators and miners in joint convention at Pittsburg on the 15th of December, 1885." In response to this call, representatives of operators and miners met in Pittsburg at the appointed time; and a scale of prices for mining was drafted for Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. This scale was afterwards approved by the First Annual Joint Conference of Miners and Operators at Columbus, Ohio, in February, 1886, and was known as the Pittsburg Scale. The scale was revised at the second annual joint conference, also held at Columbus in 1887; and again at the third annual joint confer-

ators would cheerfully welcome a general strike, as it would clean up stocks, and might have the effect of establishing a sensible and practical differential in the four principal mining States of the Middle West, thus enabling all miners to make fair living wages."

* See, for example, the official report of the *Proceedings of the Third Annual Joint Convention of Miners and Operators*, held at Pittsburg, February 7-9, 1888, especially pp. 57-81.

† For a history of these agreements see the report on the coal miners' strike and lock-out in Northern Illinois, by Messrs. J. M. Gould and F. H. Wines, special commissioners appointed by the governor in August, 1889, quoted in Mr. Henry D. Lloyd's *A Strike of Millionaires against Miners*, p. 202.

ence, held at Pittsburg in 1888. Peace was maintained during these three years between the operators and miners represented at the conventions. From the beginning, however, the operators in Southern Illinois refused to enter the organization. In 1888 those of Northern Illinois withdrew, and in 1889 the Indiana operators withdrew. The withdrawal of the Illinois and Indiana operators, and the fact that the Grape Creek Coal Company (Illinois), after agreeing to pay the scale adopted for 1889, refused to do so, greatly weakened the system. Besides the strike at Grape Creek, which lasted two years, and ended with the defeat of the miners, there were also strikes and lockouts in Northern Illinois, with some minor difficulties between miners and operators in Ohio.* But there was no general strike over all the States for eight years after the interstate system was established.

In 1893, when the business depression came, what was left of the system of joint action disappeared altogether, a number of operators maintaining that they could no longer abide by it. The miners did all in their power to continue these agreements, in order to avert a strike.† It was foreseen early in 1894 that a reduction of wages would be asked for by the operators, and the miners made a last attempt to adjust differences amicably by calling a convention of miners and operators from the various States, to be held in Columbus in January. But the attendance at this convention on the part of the operators was too small to accomplish anything.‡ The result was that at a national convention of the United Mine Workers of America, held in Columbus, April 10, it was decided that a general suspension of work should take place, beginning April 21, the object being to enforce by this means a demand for a restoration of mining prices to those of 1893.§ The struggle was one of the most bitter in the coal mining industry up to that time. While the operators refused to attend a national convention for the purpose of settling differ-

* See *Proceedings of Eighth Annual Convention of the Ohio Miners' Amalgamated Association*, pp. 4, 5.

† *Mine Workers' Journal*, September 2, 1897.

‡ *Thirteenth Annual Report of Illinois Bureau of Labor Statistics: Coal*, p. 6.

§ *Mineral Resources: Coal* (1894), p. 22.

ences, they generally expressed a willingness to meet the miners in their respective districts for that purpose. This was finally acceded to by the miners; and, after a struggle of three months, a compromise was effected, with but little gain for the miners.*

For the next two years the miners had to treat with the operators of the various districts separately, with the result that the field where the natural advantages were greatest and the unions of the miners weakest fixed the price of mining for all. At the beginning of 1897 the last straw was put on the camel's back. Operators in some of the States, especially in the Pittsburg district and in Northern Illinois, who in a measure had been accustomed to meet their miners for local adjustments of prices, refused longer to continue even these relations. Repeated attempts were made on the part of the miners, but without avail. In the Pittsburg district, conference after conference was called for adjusting the price for mining; but to these conferences a large majority of the operators paid no attention. Not until every attempt at a peaceful adjustment had failed was the strike of 1897 determined upon. When once it was begun, its object was to secure not merely local agreements, but an interstate agreement for uniform scales of prices, such as had obtained from 1886 to 1894.

How far the strike of 1897 accomplished this we shall now see. In response to the order to strike, issued by the executive board of the United Mine Workers at the beginning of July, work ceased in most of the mines of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. The notable exceptions were the mines in Southern Illinois and those of one company, presently to be mentioned, in the Pittsburg district. West Virginia fell into line later, but only after the most strenuous efforts on the part of the strike leaders. It was attempted, also, to carry the strike into Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Iowa; but these States responded but feebly, and at no time were of much importance in the strike, except in so far as they furnished coal for the markets of the striking States. The

* See *Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Convention of the United Mine Workers of America* (1895), p. 5; cp. *Mineral Resources: Coal* (1896), p. 77.

avowed purpose of the strike leaders was, if possible, to suspend work in all places where bituminous coal was mined, and so to create a coal famine, which would raise the price of coal, and enable the operators to pay higher wages. One of the striking features of the whole struggle was that from the outset the miners had the sympathy of a large number of operators, and of the press and the general public. The *Black Diamond*, the newspaper of the operators, expressed this feeling strongly; and equally strong expressions came from other representatives of the employers.*

At the end of the first week of the strike, things had taken upon themselves definite shape; and the strike leaders, with headquarters at Columbus, Ohio, were able to count their forces and define more clearly the battle before them. It was estimated that about 150,000 men had laid down their tools. That this large number ceased work so soon after the order to strike was given is remarkable, when it is considered that less than 5 per cent. of the miners were members of unions.† Their action shows the conditions to have been such that but little inducement was needed to bring the men out. Those failing to respond were the miners of West Virginia, the miners of the New York and Cleveland Gas Coal Company in the Pittsburg district, and a considerable number in Southern Illinois. In these districts the miners' unions were weakest. In West Virginia and Southern Illinois there was but little organization among the men. The miners of the New York and Cleveland Gas Coal Company were tied hand and foot by an "iron-clad" contract. They had been compelled, Novem-

*The *Black Diamond* said on August 28: "Coal is too cheap . . . where the price obtained is not sufficient to pay a living price for the labor employed in its production. . . . Through sharp competition, commodities are brought down, down, down, wages following the descending scale, until, out of sheer misery, and not from any innate captiousness, revolt in the shape of a strike comes." And again, on July 17: "The fact that the strikers now have the entire sympathy of the public, and the moral, if tacit, support of the operators as a whole, should go far to pave the way to an early adjustment and basis for an equitable mining scale for the miners in the several States concerned."

† Mr. W. C. Pearce, secretary-treasurer of the United Mine Workers, informed the present writer in a letter of December 9, 1897, that, "when the recent strike began, we had less than 10,000 members in good standing in our organization." According to *Mineral Resources* (1896), p. 31, the total number of men employed in bituminous mines in the United States in 1896 was 244,171.

ber 1, 1896, to sign a contract for one year which prohibited their belonging to any union, or from leaving the employment of the company without giving "satisfactory" reasons, under penalty of forfeiting all moneys due them at the time for mining coal.* The contract also stipulated that the price to be paid for mining should be 10 cents per ton less than any other price paid in the Pittsburg district. But, if in the other mines of the district a strike should occur for an increase in wages, then the price paid by this company should be increased 10 cents per ton during such strike. The evident purpose was to prevent the miners from striking under any circumstances whatever. When, later, they dared to attend meetings held by strike leaders, not being able to give "satisfactory" excuses for their conduct, they were forced to forfeit the money due them for coal mined.†

It soon became apparent that the great battles of the strike must be fought in West Virginia and with the New York and

* The form of contract is printed in *United Mine Workers' Journal*, September 16, 1897.

The New York and Cleveland Gas Coal Company operates three mines, and employs about 1,200 men. For some years past it has resorted to extraordinary methods in order to hold its men in subjection. A trustworthy informant says that a few years ago, before a miner could obtain employment at its mines, he had to allow the company to build him a house, and allow a certain amount with interest to be deducted regularly from his earnings to pay for it. Then the company would present its "iron-clad" contract to be signed, with its several prohibitions in regard to strikes and miners' unions. If the miner signed it, he was bound hand and foot for a year. If he would not sign it, but preferred to work elsewhere, he could do so at the expense of letting his house stand vacant, since the company would not engage any one who rented it, and none but a miner would wish to rent it. The same informant says that these contracts are presented to each of the three sets of miners in the three mines in turn. If the first set refused to sign, those in the other two mines are kept working until the first submit. In the same way the others are compelled to submit. The miners are mainly Italians, Bohemians, and Slavs, with a few Germans and French.

† So stated in a personal letter from a leading official of the miners in the Pittsburg district. At the close of the strike the company offered to pay all moneys forfeited to those who would return to work, besides offering in some cases to pay a dollar a day for each day the miners were on strike. A large number returned to work on these conditions. Many of the men succeeded in finding work elsewhere, where union prices are now being paid. In December, 1897, about 400 men were still on strike, being supported by contributions from other miners in the State who are at work. A number of those who did not return to work have entered suits against the company to recover their wages.

The explanation of the inducements offered the men to return to work is that the price paid for mining in these mines remained (December, 1897) 11 cents below that paid elsewhere in the district.

Cleveland Gas Coal Company. With these mines supplying the market, the fight elsewhere would be useless. Accordingly, organizers were sent into those fields to persuade the miners still working to make common cause with the strikers. In the Pittsburgh district, large numbers of men were soon marching to the vicinity of the mines of the Gas Coal Company, where they formed several camps, christened "Camp Determination," "Camp Despair," "Camp Desolation," and the like. Here mass meetings were held, and the miners still working were importuned in every possible way to join the ranks of the strikers. This was at the beginning of August. By August 5 their efforts were successful, and nearly all the 1,200 miners quit work.* Attempts were made later to operate the mines with other laborers, but with little success. The camps remained for some time longer, keeping up a vigilant watch lest the miners should be persuaded to return to work. To meet this move, the company secured an injunction against the officers of the United Mine Workers, on the ground that through them its property was endangered by the gathering of large crowds in the vicinity of the mines. This injunction had no immediate effect; but later the camps were broken up, and the strikers forced to disperse.† Great precautions were taken by the strikers against any outbreak. In some instances the strike leaders were arrested, but at once gave bail, and were free again. Governor Hasting, of Pennsylvania, fearing riot, had the militia in constant readiness. But nothing serious happened: no blood was shed, and no lives were lost.‡

On July 27 an important conference was held at Wheeling, West Virginia. By request of President Ratchford, of the

* *Chicago Record*, August 5, 1897.

† For the text of the injunction see *United Mine Workers' Journal*, September 16, 1897.

‡ The fatal conflict between Sheriff Martin and striking miners near Hazelton, Pennsylvania, September 10, 1897, in which twenty miners were killed and several wounded, had nothing whatever to do with the strike in the bituminous coal fields. It was connected with an independent strike of anthracite coal miners in the Hazelton district. The *Black Diamond* of September 18 (when a settlement had been reached) speaks of the strike in the bituminous fields as one "not the least notable feature of which was the marked absence of riot and bloodshed."

United Mine Workers, President Gompers, of the American Federation of Labor, issued a call to the various national trade unions of the country to send representatives to Wheeling to discuss ways and means of assisting the miners in their struggle.* About thirty representatives of nearly as many different trades responded. The result of the conference was that a large number of organizers was sent into the various mining districts of the State to urge the miners to quit work. Very soon, however, attempts were made to restrain these organizers, by injunctions from the courts, from holding meetings in the vicinity of mines. An injunction by Judge Mason, of the Marion County Circuit Court, was issued the day before the Wheeling Conference, the persons restrained being E. V. Debs, Ratchford, and about thirty others.† Nevertheless, these men continued for some time to hold meetings. Later, August 17, Judge Jackson issued another injunction against these same organizers, a violation of which brought about the arrest of about two hundred miners and organizers. Twenty-seven of the leaders were placed in jail, while the others were given their liberty. At this juncture an appeal was made to the governor of the State, demanding the constitutional right of public assembly and free speech. On August 3 Governor Atkinson sent a reply to the committee that had waited on him, in which he said, "So long as the workingmen of this State conduct their cause in a lawful and peaceful manner, it will be my duty, as it will be my pleasure, to protect them; but, if they should, in an ill-advised hour, violate the law by interfering with the rights or property of others, it will be my sworn duty to repress energetically and speedily all lawlessness."‡ Whether or no as the result of this explicit statement, we hear thenceforth but little of injunctions and arrests. It is also due the miners to say that their leaders and officers, from the beginning to the close of the strike, both in public speeches and by bulletins and circulars sent out to the men at various times, urged the men to be law-abiding and peaceable.

* See *United Mine Workers' Journal*, July 29, 1897; and the *Chicago Journal*, July 20, 1897.

† *United Mine Workers' Journal*, August 5, 1897.

‡ See *American Federationist*, September, 1897, pp. 154, 155.

Early in the strike there had been some attempts on the part of a few operators to formulate a scheme of what they called "true uniformity." Nothing, however, was accomplished until July 1. At that time a conference was held in Pittsburg, composed of a number of operators from the Pittsburg district and of the Labor Commissioners from Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. At that conference a "uniformity" scheme was formulated. It provided for cash payments and the abolition of company stores; 2,000 pounds to the ton, and miners to be credited with the full amount of coal contained in the pit-car or wagon; check-weighman at the tippie; semi-monthly payments; uniform prices for pick mining in the thin and thick vein districts, and screens not exceeding one-half inch in aperture. A penalty for violations was provided of 10 cents per ton on the total amount of coal mined, to be paid to the other operators in proportion to the total amount of coal produced by them during the year. At conferences called to settle disputes between operators and miners no miners were to act as representatives unless they worked in the mines of subscribers to the agreement. But the agreement was not to become effective unless signed by 95 per cent. of the operators on or before January 1, 1898. The operators further wished it to be distinctly understood that this agreement had nothing to do whatever with the strike of the summer.* The plan, it should be noted, differed essentially from that of interstate agreement, which had existed from 1886 to 1894, in that it applied only to the Pittsburg district. Whether this attempt on the part of the Pittsburg operators to bring about uniform prices and regulations for mining in their district will prove successful remains to be seen. Similar attempts of this sort have been made before, but with no success, as it is extremely difficult to secure the consent of 95 per cent. of the operators.†

* See *Mine Workers' Journal*, August 5, 1897.

† In December, 1895, several meetings of operators and miners in the Pittsburg district took place, the object of which was to secure uniformity of prices and regulations for mining. It was decided that, if 95 per cent. of the operators of the district would agree to it, uniformity should be established. A committee of ten was appointed, who consulted with the different operators. After the ground had been gone over, they reported that about 92 per cent. of the operators had consented to the agreement. Mr. De Armitt, however, was not satisfied

The success of the miners in enlisting in their ranks the miners of the New York and Cleveland Gas Coal Company and a large number of those in West Virginia had a decided effect on some of the operators, especially those of the Pittsburg district. The result was that a conference of mine operators and representatives of the miners was called in Pittsburg, August 23, which lasted two days, and at which were present a number of operators who had maintained up to that time that they had nothing to discuss.* This conference accomplished nothing; but it served to define more clearly the position of the operators and the miners.

The operators were willing to submit the dispute to arbitration, but their plan was for each State to settle its own troubles. They also submitted a compromise scale of prices pending arbitration. In regard to arbitration and prices they made successively the following four propositions, each of which in turn the miners rejected:—

1. To start the mines (Pittsburg district) at 54 cents a ton, and let the award of the arbitrators apply to all the coal mined from the time of starting.

2. To start the mines at 61½ cents a ton, with other conditions as in the first proposition.

3. To start without naming a price, requiring the board of arbitrators to report within thirty days their award, which was then to apply to all the coal mined.

4. To proceed to an arbitration without starting the mines, requiring that the arbitrators shall make an award within ten days or thirty days, as the miners should desire.

with this report, and sent out his own agents to make a canvass of the operators, which, he maintained, showed that only 60 per cent. of the operators would agree to the plan. Since that time he has run his mines independently of the other operators of the district and of the United Mine Workers. See Mr. De Armitt's testimony before the Pennsylvania Legislative Committee in *United Mine Workers' Journal*, April 22, 1897, and the testimony of other operators before the same committee, *Ibid.*, April 29, 1897. Also the testimony of President Ratchford before the committee, *Ibid.*, May 6.

*Early in July it became apparent that, to settle the strike in the other States, it would be necessary to bring about a conciliation of the operators and miners in the Pittsburg district. To this end the Labor Commissioners of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, visited Pittsburg, and offered their services as arbitrators. But their attempts were not successful, the operators whose mines were still running maintaining that they had nothing to arbitrate. See the *Chicago Record* for July 9, 13, 14, 1897.

The following propositions were offered by the miners, and refused by the operators:—

1. To start the mines (in the Pittsburg district) at 69 cents a ton, the miners to accept a reduction as soon as the arbitrators could act, if their decision proved to be that this price was too high.

2. To issue a call for a conference of representatives of operators and miners from the competitive States.*

After the August conference nothing was done by the miners to settle the strike until the middle of September. In the mean time there was great destitution among the strikers. But everywhere the public responded liberally to calls for aid. Governor Bushnell, of Ohio, issued a call to the public, asking aid for the miners of his State. In all the large cities large contributions of food and money were made, and relief stores were established in the various mining communities. The various branches of the Knights of Labor and of the American Federation of Labor throughout the country also made liberal contributions. Probably never before in this country have strikers been so well supported by public sympathy and by substantial aid.

By the beginning of September the miners saw that the coal famine they had looked for had not come. Those mines in Southern Illinois and West Virginia which had failed to take part in the strike, and some of the mines of Iowa, Colorado, and other States, were shipping coal to Chicago and the East. The shipments were not large, but they were large enough to prevent a coal famine. Hence, while there was a considerable rise in the price of coal immediately after the strike was begun, the price later fell to nearly the old level.

In view of these facts and of the rapid exhaustion of the

*When asked why the miners rejected the proposition of the operators to arbitrate the strike before opening the mines, President Ratchford said; "Because it applied only to the Pittsburg district. If we go into an arbitration of that kind, we want the whole competitive field represented. They declined to join us in a call for a general proposition, and so we refused their offer of arbitration, knowing that they were merely trying to harass us with a whole series of petty arbitrations. If we should arbitrate that way here, we would be called upon to do the same in other fields; and what we want is a settlement which will be general." *Chicago Record*, August 25, where is also an account of the negotiations.

funds of the miners' unions, it was decided at a conference of the miners, held in Columbus, Ohio, September 8-11, that they should accept a compromise. Instead of holding out longer for the scale of 69 cents for the Pittsburg district, with prices in other States in proportion, it was decided to accept 65 cents for the Pittsburg district. But ten days were to be allowed before resuming work, so that the scale of prices could be adjusted in the other States. The strike, however, was to be continued in all places where a proportional scale was not agreed to; and, to aid the strikers in such places, an assessment of 10 cents per ton was voted on all coal mined by those returning to work, to continue until the strike should end everywhere.

The compromise scale was acceded to by the operators in nearly all the different fields, the two notable exceptions being the Gas Coal Company (De Armitt) in the Pittsburg district and the operators in Northern Illinois. The Gas Coal Company continued to pay its old price of 54 cents per ton, with some four hundred of its men still on strike.* In Northern Illinois the strike involved many complications, and was continued with much stubbornness on both sides until the latter part of November. In May (1897) the miners had been forced to accept a reduction of 10 cents per ton, and to sign contracts at the reduced rates for a year. It was then maintained by the operators that the reduction was necessary, in order to enable them to compete with the operators of Southern Illinois. When the miners of Northern Illinois joined the strike, it was maintained by the operators that they could not afford to pay any advance, as they had contracted to sell coal on the basis of the accepted rates. Nevertheless, the miners demanded an advance proportional to that obtained in the Pittsburg district. To determine what that advance should be, repeated conferences were held. In the course of the negotiations the operators at one time took steps towards employing Chinese in

* This was the situation in December, 1897. The miners still out at that time were supported (according to a letter from an officer of the United Mine Workers) by the 10 cent assessment on the miners of the State who were working. Whether the company will pay the Columbus rates after January, 1898, when the attempt will have been made to put the "true uniformity" plan into operation, remains to be seen.

the mines;* while some of the miners went back for a time, and later again quit work.† Finally, at a conference held at Joliet on November 22, an advance of about 10 cents a ton was granted by the operators, to continue until May 1, 1898.‡

It is generally understood in the Pittsburg district that the settlement there is only temporary. Further conferences for fixing differentials in the various mining regions are expected, and a revival of the old interstate agreement is desired by the miners. The situation is still unsettled, and the future uncertain. On the whole, however, the miners have made considerable gains in the prices obtained for mining, and so have cause for congratulation. There is some prospect also that a return will be made to the system of interstate agreements, by which great strikes, like that of the past summer, may be averted. When the ignorance and low standard of a large proportion of those engaged in this struggle are considered, and the destitution and poverty of all, it is safe to say that no strike in recent years has been so well conducted or ended so peacefully as the coal miners' strike of 1897. A great army of over 150,000 men have, under the most trying circumstances, been brought through a struggle of over three months without committing any violent depredations and without rioting or shedding of blood.

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* A leading operator says that the only question about employing Chinese miners was whether sufficient protection against the strikers and their sympathizers could be given.

† This was true of the miners of Braceville and Coal City.

‡ I have omitted many details of the strike in Northern Illinois, and have given only the main facts and the results. The information in regard to this field was obtained directly from both operators and miners' officials. An account of the Joliet conference may be found in the *Joliet Republican* for November 24, 1897. In December about 1,000 miners in Streator and 2,000 in Southern Illinois were still out, the controversy being chiefly in regard to certain gross weight requirements under a recent State law, which brought an additional complication in the situation.